Terrorist Motivations for the Use of Extreme Violence

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Introduction

In his book, *Why do Muslims Rebel?,* Mohammed Hafez cautions that, "Western responses to Islamist violence must be measured and well thought out. Misconstruing the underlying causes of Islamist rage or overacting to Islamist violence may only intensify militancy, not temperate it."[1] For policy-makers, understanding the source or cause of discontent serves as the best hope to remedy the ills that lie beneath what some refer to as "sacred" terrorism or religious terrorism. Yet a basic question is what would extremists hope to achieve by resorting to such violent acts? Is terrorism ever rational? Can terrorism be deterred? All too often, our analysis of extremist motives begins with our reaction to the terrorist act itself. However, for certain extremist organizations, channeling efforts to identify and isolate the root cause for such events requires a deeper understanding of the intricacies that foment such profound actions, specifically suicide terrorism and the use of a weapon of mass destruction.

In a recent review by Jeff Goodwin of Jessica Stern's *Terror in the Name of God*, he stated that few studies probe deeply into the cause of terrorism and, as a result, "it remains a mystery. A contributing factor is that social movement scholars with very few exceptions have said little about terrorism. Nor have they paid sustained attention to the more general question of how movement organizations make strategic choices, of which terrorism is one."[2] To resolve group level problems we need to view it from a group level or movement level perspective. It is at that point that we can start crafting more tailored solutions to counter the extremist threat. The central theme of this essay is to examine the rational behind terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction. Here, I compare Aum Shinrikyo and al Qaeda to analyze to what extent their actions were the result of strategic choice or group behavior.

In brief, Aum Shinrikyo's decision to attack civilians on a Japanese subway reflects an organization in a desperate fight for survival. According to Martha Crenshaw's organizational perspective, "terrorist actions often appear inconsistent, erratic, and unpredictable" and terrorist acts occur as a result of internal group dynamics.[3] The group's ultimate decision to strike a Tokyo subway system was as much an attack on Japan's political culture as it was an act by a desperate group. In contrast, al Qaeda's methodical planning and extensive preparation reflects an instrumental approach where the act of terrorism is that of strategic choice founded on the basis of collective values. According to Crenshaw, such an organization ultimately fails when the

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group is unable to reach its political objectives or when the cost of conducting such terrorist acts exceeds any foreseeable benefits.

Aum Shinrikyo

Today, evolving before us is the fear of continued acts of "megaterrorism" such as the use of a weapon of mass destruction (WMD). Authors such as Graham Allison, Bruce Hoffman, Walter Laqueur, and others have written about the prospects of such actions. In fact, Thomas Schelling in 1979 wrote that "Sometime in the 1980s an organization that is not a national government may acquire a few nuclear weapons…. By 'organization' I mean a *political movement*, a government in exile, a separatist or secessionist party, a military rebellion, adventurers from the underground or the underworld, or even some group of people merely bent on showing that it can be done."[4] Through his description, Schelling argues that distinctions exist between terrorist groups. If terrorist groups are distinctive in their motives, it would stand to reason that in order to deter or influence such organizations, one must also be able to isolate and differentiate the group's goals and objectives from their rhetoric. For example, in comparing the Japanese terrorist cult Aum Shinrikyo to al Qaeda, we find distinctions in orientation and ideology, yet both are often characterized by the use of religious extremism to serve ideological objectives.

Before the events of 9/11, Aum Shinrikyo unleashed fears of extreme terror with the release of sarin gas in a Japanese subway in 1995. Led by a religious mystic, Shoko Asahara, followers of the movement had come to believe that "Armageddon will come at the end of this century and…only a merciful, godly race will survive. The leader of this race will emerge in Japan."[5] Asahara, characterized as charismatic, highly ambitious individual, methodically built a cult that, at its peak, reached 40,000 members world-wide with an estimated 30,000 followers in Russia and other areas to include Australia, Sri Lanka, and the United States.[6] The group capitalized on millennial visions and apocalyptic predictions to frame their group's doctrine which was deeply influenced by the works of Nostradamus; his work serves as a cornerstone of the group's teachings.[7] Aum's followers actively recruited students and professionals in the fields of medicine, science, computers, engineering, and other technical areas. Asahara's charisma and message seemed to have a great appeal to many who felt alienated by the industrialized, secular, and conformist aspects of Japanese society.[8]

At its peak, it is estimated that Aum Shinrikyo's worth was as much as $1.5 billion.[9] With such great financial resources, Aum Shinrikyo invested capital to support high-tech, state-of-the-art laboratories and funded its own research circumventing restrictions normally associated with larger corporate research laboratories.[10] In addition to collecting monies through donations, tithing, and sales of religious materials, Aum conducted seminars and courses in the cult's teachings charging hundreds to tens of thousands of dollars to participate in these sessions. In fact, Aum Shinrikyo diversified its enterprises by running a chain of restaurants in Tokyo as well as owning a computer manufacturing firm that assembled and sold computers in Japan with parts imported from Taiwan.[11] Other more surreptitious practices included the manufacturing of illegal drugs that was supported by the Japanese mafia (the Yakuza) with a marketing agreement. Further, Aum engaged in a practice referred to as "green mail" where Aum would extort community leaders by threatening to establish a "branch" office or school within their local community. By engaging in such practices, the cult succeeded in gaining leverage through extortion, coercion, theft, and murder as a form of fund-raising for the cult.[12]

Asahara and his closet followers planned to defend themselves against the coming Armageddon by creating a formidable arsenal that would enable Aum Shinrikyo to survive and become the most powerful group in the world. Despite high expectations and several attempts at local elections, Asahara and other leaders failed to gain a seat in the Japanese parliament. The result seemed to have radicalized the core leaders even more resulting from unmet expectations and the group's goals in changing Japanese political culture. He would later preach that it was "the

duty of Aum members to hasten Armageddon" and subsequent efforts to attack the Japanese legislature also were indicative of Aum's disappointments with the democratic system.[13]

While the group's most notorious act involved the release of sarin gas, Aum attempted to acquire various types of other weapons to include biological, nuclear, and radiological material. The cult's close relationship with followers in Russia positioned Aum Shinrikyo to leverage its vast wealth, contacts with Russian security forces, and dealers in the black-market yet failed to acquire weapons-grade fissile material.[14] Aum remained open to all alternatives but ultimately chose to pursue the chemical option and made several attempts with limited results between 1990 through 1995 leading up to the attack of the Japanese subway in Tokyo. Asahara and his core leaders would soon discover that days prior to the subway attack, local authorities and law enforcement personnel had plans to conduct police raids against cult facilities and offices. By March 20, 1995, Aum's leaders believed that the only strategy that remained was a pre-emptive attack to strike fear as a last act in order to ensure the group's survival. Despite having limited success in its previous efforts with chemical agents, Aum had believed that a successful attack would have sufficient psychological impact as to allow the group to exist. In the end, what remains clear is that Aum displayed a great deal of resolve in its effort to employ tactics that would cause mass-casualties.[15]

The perceived response by Japanese authorities compels Asahara and his inner circle to go further underground. From Aum's perspective, this act improved the cult's chances for survival while reducing the likelihood of death or capture, particularly among the group's leaders. Going underground isolates the movement from the outside world limiting the opportunity to add new recruits or re-replenish losses. Additionally, this action has the added effect of further radicalizing the group's tactics and ideology. As a result, terrorist behavior begins to reflect the internal dynamics of the organization rather than achieving a specific strategic objective.[16] The group begins to develop a tight identity, social connections, and interpersonal bonds that a sense of cohesion. It intensifies the groups resolve to move towards more violent activity.[17] The organization's decision-making begins to reflect the group's internal dynamics and group think eliminates decision within the leadership's inner core. Loyalty to the peer group takes on a more profound meaning and an important motive as activists shift towards a deepening commitment to the cause.[18] Survival is at stake and the group becomes more willing to use extreme violence to counter any threat to its existence.

Within the context of Aum's value system, the cult's actions appear logical. Aum felt cornered and that their last option for its survival was to strike back with its weapon. Despite previous failures, the group had committed itself to developing and using chemical toxins as their primary instrument of extreme violence. As a self-legitimizing organization, Aum had rejected Japanese society and believed it had no other option but to confront authority. Its survival was at stake. One can argue that Aum sought an indirect approach to counter society's overwhelming preponderance of military and law enforcement forces by resorting to indirect methods. In failing to reach its goal of achieving political power through legitimate means, the group's leadership decided that a pre-emptive strike was their best and only option.

Al-Qaeda

Similarly, one can draw parallels between Osama bin Laden and the development of antisystem frames used by al Qaeda to provide ethical justification for violence against civilians. For example, on February 23, 1998, Osama bin Laden released his *Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders,* where he states his three major grievances with the United States; first, the occupation of "the lands of Islam in the holiest places, the Arabian peninsula"; the second, "the crusader-Zionist alliance"; the third, "to fragment all the (Arab) states of the region such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan into paper statelets and through their disunion and weakness to guarantee Israel's survival and the continuation of the brutal crusade occupation of the peninsula."[19]

Released by the World Islamic Front, this fatwa "became the manifesto of the full-fledged global Salafi jihad" allowing the jihad to carry "the fight to the 'far enemy.'"[20]

By tapping into a view supported by a broad public, bin Laden attempts to draw support from among the greater Muslim community. His message strives to appeal to a wider global audience and rally a Muslim population of over one billion people to al Qaeda's cause. His effort is intended to reduce the psychological cost of participating in a radical cause or terrorist organization. In an article by della Porta, the author states that "The ideology of the terrorist organizations offered (1) a justification of political violence, including murder; (2) an image of the external world that masked the failures of the armed struggle; and (3) a positive evaluation of the role of individual action."[21] Similar to Aum, al Qaeda has drawn from those sympathetic to al-Qaeda's cause. Bin Laden has leveraged common cultural frames and religious ones to serve as part of the group's strategic ideological objectives. Therefore, as with Aum Shinrikyo, one must distinguish and separate between religious and ideological factors that shape the group's short-term and long-term objectives.

Unlike Aum, however, al Qaeda's influence has extended to groups with known or alleged connections to al Qaeda including the Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore; Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya in Egypt; Harakat ul-Maujahidin in Pakistan; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in Central Asia; Jaish-e-Mohammed in India and Pakistan; and, al-Jihad in Egypt.[22] But the distinction between al Qaeda and its regional surrogate groups differ in that al Qaeda possesses a global view whereas the concerns by these various groups are more local. Likewise, these local groups have gone to considerable lengths to justify their support to the local population and would be less inclined towards resorting to mass violence. While they may agree that an attack on the United States is justified, a similar response locally would be counterproductive to the group's cause. Yet, to the extent that these corollary groups support al Qaeda directly or through more passive means, knowledge and understanding of the overall network is critical to determining the groups' vulnerabilities and potential opportunities to influence, deny, degrade, or disrupt threats of extreme violence.

Arguably, in the case of a group like al Qaeda, the framing of such religious zeal serves a useful purpose to promote the group's ideological objectives as well as justifying the use of collective violence.[23] According to Hafez, "Muslims rebel because they encounter an ill-fated combination of political and institutional exclusion, on the one hand, and reactive and indiscriminate repression on the other. When states do not provide their Islamist opposition movements opportunities for institutional participation, and employ repression indiscriminately against these movements after a period of prior mobilization, Islamist will most probably rebel."[24] Hafez describes how radical Islamists organize themselves and demand strict ideological and behavioral adherence of each of their members. In a similar way, Aum used threat, fear, murder, and intimidation to mitigate dissention within the group. This radicalized view, however, further isolates the organization from the rest of society.

The increased radicalization produces a "spiral of encapsulation" that gradually isolates Islamists rebels from the broader movement. Such extremism increases moral justification for its cause while inducing a separation from the greater society. To be successful "Organizers of violence must align their tactics with cultural norms, symbols, and ethics that give moral meaning to acts of violence. Culture provides a "tool kit" of concepts, myths, and symbols from which militant organizations could selectively draw to construct strategies of action."[25] However, if a society places a premium on such sacrifice, cultural framing can succeed in intensifying and reinforcing extreme use of violence such as suicide terrorism. Thus, martyrdom and suicide terror becomes the weapon of choice for producing mass violence. Academics would argue that mass terror, like suicide terrorism, serves a strategic purpose and is considered a coercive tool by terrorist organizations. While nation-states apply the threat of economic sanctions and conventional firepower as a means of coercion, terrorists increasingly use suicide terror as the instrument of choice.[26]

Unlike Aum Shinrikyo, al Qaeda used a technologically conservative weapon combined with variants on a familiar tactic of hijacking, bombing, and martyrdom as suicide terror.[27] Yet, like Aum, al Qaeda expressed a strong interest and effort in acquiring weapons of mass destruction. Long before Bin Laden's 2003 *fatwa,* "the global jihadist network have made their desire for nuclear weapons for use against the United States and explicit, by both word and deed. Bin Laden has called the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) a 'religious duty.'"[28] Ayman al Zawahiri, leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) expands bin Laden's views by stating that the objective of the global jihad against the United States and its allies is to:

1. To inflict maximum casualties against the opponent;
2. To concentrate on the method of martyrdom operations as the most successful way of inflicting damage against the opponent and the least costly to the Mujahedin in terms of casualties;
3. Targets as well as the type and method of weapons used must be chosen to have an impact on the structure of the enemy;
4. To reiterate that focusing on the domestic enemy alone will not be feasible at this stage.[29]

As reported in *The New York Times*, bin Laden's group, like Aum, sought to build a nuclear-yield weapon. After a few attempts, bin Laden's organization fell victim to scams by vendors in an effort to acquire weapons-grade material.[30] The inability to acquire the necessary fissile material is likely to have convinced al Qaeda planners to shift its focus to chemical agents as a possible weapon of choice. However, as demonstrated by the multiple failed attempts by Aum, successfully executing a chemical attack is not a simple task. In a conversation with Dr. David Rapoport, he stated that he believes the use of chemical weapons is less likely due to the historical difficulty in weaponizing and delivering a chemical attack.[31] As al Qaeda training videos surfaced in August 2002, the public at large became convinced of the group's motivation, desire, and intent to using chemical and biological toxins if given the opportunity.[32] In the wake of 9/11, the idea never seemed more plausible, yet al Qaeda displayed a very pragmatic approach in resorting to a strategy that seemed tried and true. To al Qaeda, history had shown that suicide terrorism is a highly effective asymmetric weapon that could yield results.

In a recent article, Robert Pape proffers five key observations on how terrorist organizations have assessed the effectiveness of suicide attacks and the limits of their coercive ability. First, he states that suicide terrorism is strategic. He asserts that the majority of suicide attacks occur as part of an organized group's activities in support of a broader strategic framework to support a particular goal. Second, the suicide terrorism is geared to forcing democracies to give ground on nationalistic causes. Third, he states that "during the past twenty years, suicide terrorism has been steadily rising because terrorists have learned that it pays." Suicide terrorists sought to compel American and French military forces to abandon Lebanon in 1983, Israeli forces to leave Lebanon in 1985, Israeli forces to quit the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in 1994 and 1995. Following this logic, the Madrid Bombings which occurred three days before a nation wide general election, resulted in the death of 192 civilians. The dramatic events had an immediate impact on the Spanish elections and subsequent withdrawal of Spain's troops in Iraq. Published reports would later reveal the al Qaeda had identified Spain as a key target in their overall strategic plan. The belief was that Spain was "very vulnerable to attacks, primarily because public opposition to the war is total, and the government is virtually alone on this issue."[33]

Pape believes that "although moderate suicide terrorism led to moderate concessions, these more ambitious suicide terrorist campaigns are not likely to achieve still greater gains and may well fail completely."[34] States may choose to abandon or concede short-term goals in lieu of any major concessions. Decisions that would have long term implications such as compromising the state's overall security, significant loss of territory, or economic deprivation would be unlikely. Secondly, the "most promising way to contain suicide terrorism is to reduce terrorists' confidence in their ability to carry out such attacks on the target society."[35] In essence, terrorists resort to

suicide terrorism because on some level it works. As a strategy, martyrdom and mass violence gives hope to the extremist cause and the historical precedence is indicative that at some level, success can be achieved through the use of extremist violence. By focusing solely on the prevention of a similar attack, we do so at the expense of understanding the root cause and motives that led to the violent attack in the first place. Concentrating our energies as to why and how organizations resort to extremism requires an analysis of how and why groups employ terrorism.

Strategic Choice or Group Behavior

Martha Crenshaw emphasizes the importance of analyzing how terrorist groups behave as a key process in developing effective policy recommendations.[36] She develops two approaches to better understand terrorism and its consequences. The first approach argues that terrorism represents a strategic choice from a set of possible alternatives by a political actor. Behaving on a set of collective values, an organization may choose terrorism to achieve radical political and social change. This instrumental approach is viewed as a response to government behavior and actions. The corresponding view is that as cost for conducting such activity increases or as the reward for such actions decreases, violence will be less likely to occur. The instrumental perspective takes a basic rational approach of cost/benefit analysis in choosing terrorism. The second approach emphasizes the internal organizational process within a particular group or across similar groups who have common objectives. The emphasis is on the internal dynamics of a group where leaders offer incentives to individuals or control their actions to discourage defection of dissent within the organization and foster intense loyalty. In effect, the actions of this type of group may not correspond to the organization's stated political objectives and more reflective of an erratic organization displaying unpredictable behavior showing more of a struggle of survival rather than activity that supports ideological objectives. Such a group would be more inclined to change internal incentives towards individuals in response to perceived threats from external pressures applied to the organization.

How then would this apply to the Aum Shinrikyo and al Qaeda? We shall first compare the similarities of both organizations.

Table 1: Similarities between Aum Shinrikyo and al Qaeda

Similarities
• Amassed a great deal of wealth and financial resources
• Global reach and access to external funds & support
• Strong interest and pursuit of WMD: well resourced/strong desires
• Expressed political objectives and a call for change
• Followers influenced by charismatic leadership
• Discouraged by the state apparatus and desire for radical change
• Operated within "permissive" environments

Followers were not of one specific class or social strata
Displayed ability to adapt and leverage existing technology

With regards to weapons of mass destruction, the most telling comparison is the desire and financial resources to pursue chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons. Both organizations believed that violence can achieve political change and both believed in the possibility that terrorism was an effective means to that end. However, as we compare the differences between both organizations, we begin to draw distinctions in their decision-making that reflects Crenshaw's original supposition regarding instrumental and organizational approaches.

Table 2: Differences between Aum Shinrikyo and al Qaeda

Differences	
Aum Shinrikyo	*Al Qaeda*
• Manufactured/synthetic belief system	• Utilized pre-existing cultural and religious frames
• Used a chemical/biological weapons	• Achieved an effect similar to a WMD
• Concentrated on WMD despite failures	• Abandoned WMD & adapted modified proven tactics
• Attacked from within	• Attacked from afar
• Reacting to pending strike	• Comprised of members from an exiled community (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, etc.)
• Remained in country of origin primarily	• Relied on networked strategy to achieve effect
• Relied on internal technical knowledge & expertise for WMD programs	• Sought external support for WMD develop
• Sought to mine & manufacture fissile material	• Demands on revamping the political system and secular construct
• Ran for political office and lost	

Drawing from these conclusions, we begin to see the contrast between the organizations. While Aum expresses political change as their ultimate desire, its decision-making reflects more of an organizational survivalist construct in achieving its ends. Unlike al Qaeda, Aum becomes focused in using a weapon of terror to achieve its objectives. This obsessive fixation continues despite numerous experimental attempts and failures. Aum's leaders appear almost unconstrained by their own ego and driven to validate its extensive investment in research and equipment by using chemical weapons. In contrast, al Qaeda abandons its effort only after repeated attempts failed to achieve desired outcomes leading the group to instead modify known capabilities, bombing, and hijacking, with the intent to improve their chances of success. In keeping with a more instrumental approach, al Qaeda maintains its focus on accomplishing its operational objective despite the specific tactical means of doing so. Although al Qaeda had the wealth, resources, and contacts necessary for such a venture its leaders decided to pursue other alternatives to achieve the desired effect. However, what both examples show is that despite wealth and connections problems still exist in pursuing weapons of mass destruction.

A second key observation is the difference in how each organization frames its cause. Al Qaeda leveraged existing sentiments and feelings shared among a large majority of the Muslim world. The leadership within al Qaeda drew upon widely shared beliefs that roots of the Muslim world's problem lies with the continuing influence of the West in Islamic affairs. His message had a broad appeal because it resonates with existing cultural, religious, and societal beliefs. Al Qaeda's leaders hijacked existing beliefs to satisfy ideological objectives. In contrast, Aum's belief core is wholly manufactured, synthetic in its origins. First, while Asahara dabbled in the practices of Hinduism, its belief structure was pieced together from various religious and non-religious beliefs, such as the writing of Nostradamus. Second, unlike life in a predominantly Islamic culture, Aum Shinrikyo's teachings were not necessarily reinforced by everyday surroundings, societal contacts, and interactions. Unless a follower of Aum lived on one of its communities, individuals were susceptible to external influences. To some degree, this constraint contributed to need for suppressing dissent within the group.

Conclusion

The likelihood of terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction in the post-9/11 era remains unclear. However, the scale of attack on 9/11 suggests that despite the technical challenges, groups will continue to expend efforts in possessing a capacity to cause extreme violence whether through conventional or unconventional means. As Dr. McAdam suggests, more effort and dialogue between academic and government communities is necessary to understand the role of extremism and source of contention behind groups that may spawn from social movements.[37] This would help policy-makers identify and distinguish groups who approach terrorism from an organizational or instrumental perspective.

Pressures applied to a group dominated by internal dynamics would compel the organization to implode by isolating the particular individual goals versus political ideology. This is best exemplified in the discussion of Aum Shinrikyo above. Within the context of Aum's value system, the cult's actions appeared logical. Their rejection of Japanese society is best illustrated in their response to pending raids by Japanese authorities. In lieu of achieve political power through legitimate means, the group ultimately sought to achieve its objective through extreme violence. In contrast, a group choosing terrorism among other alternatives will calculate actions based on perceived benefits and costs. This approach would suggest that presenting a set of different alternatives as substitutes or increasing costs to the degree that any benefits gained by terrorist in using extreme violence would not be sufficient to achieving political objectives. In the case of al Qaeda, the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction was simply a part of the range of options available for instrumental purposes. Aum's obsession with WMD technology combined with the permissive environment of Japanese legal system enabled Asahara's followers to pursue WMD technology despite numerous failed experiments. Today, changes in the legal system and law enforcement techniques would make the duplication of Aum's extensive WMD apparatus more

difficult. In other words, the changes adopted by Japan's legal system and experience gained from Asahara and his cult have raised the cost of pursuing such tactics, thus mitigating any desire to replicate Aum's program in Japan.

In light of 9/11 and for groups who follow al Qaeda, an attack using chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons has yet to be seen. The potential is undeniable. Technical challenges will remain an issue in the short-run which will make conventional weapons applied in an asymmetric approach a primary means to cause mass disruption. As a result, the long-term goal should be continued emphasis on enforcing constraints and controls on the proliferation of sensitive materials to include commercially available fissile matter and not solely weapons-grade material. Experts contend that a radiological dispersal device (RDD) or "dirty bomb", a combination of both conventional explosives with low grade radiological material, is a greater threat than a nuclear weapon.[38] However, future terrorist groups may examine both cases a draw from them the next most probable course of action. For example, where Aum failed to hire the expertise necessary for a nuclear weapon's program, would an instrumentalist group like al Qaeda stand a better chance of recruiting Islamic extremists with the requisite skills? Secondly, some argue that Islamist groups like al Qaeda are on their way out. If this is the case, what would preclude a group from following Aum Shinrikyo's model of resorting to extreme violence with the use of a more catastrophic weapon? In either case, the goal should be eliminating a terrorist's hope for success, shoring up defenses, and deterring the proliferation of WMD technology. Eliminate the means and we reduce the likelihood of a mass attack. Likewise, by understanding the problem we increase the probability of mitigating potential extremist growth while reducing the seeds of future threats.

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37. Conversation with Dr. Doug McAdam during recent conference held at the Naval Postgraduate School, April 5-7, 2005.

38. Peter Zimmerman, *Dirty Bombs: The Threat Revisited,* *Defense Horizons,* Center for Technology and National Security Policy, no. 38 (January 2004).